

BRAVE BLACK REGIMENT: THE FORMATION OF THE FIFTY-FOURTH  
MASSACHUSETTS REGIMENT, JANUARY 1863 - JUNE 1864

A thesis presented to the faculty of the U.S. Army  
Command and General Staff College in partial  
fulfillment of the requirement for the  
degree

MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE

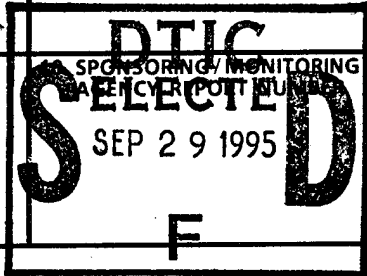
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MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE

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## ABSTRACT

BRAVE BLACK REGIMENT THE FORMATION OF THE FIFTY-FOURTH  
MASSACHUSETTS REGIMENT: JANUARY 1863 - JUNE 1864 by Major Joseph  
B. Coleman, USA, 84 pages.

This study documents the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment's history from its creation on 26 January 1863 through the attainment of equal pay on 15 June 1864. Previous historians have not chronicled, in detail, the early history of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment. This study fills part of that gap.

The Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment was the first black regiment of the North organized after the Emancipation Proclamation became law. This study focused on the recruiting, training, and formation of that regiment. The Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment trained and initially garrisoned at Camp Meigs located in Readville, Massachusetts. All officers assigned to the regiment were white. The white officers of the regiment were proud to serve in the black regiment and often stood by the black soldiers. The white officers did not allow the soldiers' skin color to affect their dedication to the regiment. All black enlisted soldiers assigned to the new regiment met strict screening requirements. Abolitionists recruited a large percentage of the black men for the regiment. Black men were recruited across the northern United States and Canada.

The thesis concludes that the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment, despite problems and setbacks, performed its first missions successfully, and subsequently affected black rights after the Civil War. The conclusion includes suggestions and areas for further study.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Black citizens have played an active role in the armed forces since the Revolutionary War. Blacks fought in the United States Navy and in State Militias during the War of 1812. The Civil War, however, marked the first large scale participation of blacks in the United States Armed Forces. When the Civil War began, many black men dreamed of the chance to strike a blow for the liberation of the Negro race. They were ready to fight for the abolition of slavery. Their desire to serve was rejected until the first officially sanctioned regiment of Northern freed black soldiers formed the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment in 1863. Eventually, over 180,000 black men enlisted and served as soldiers during the Civil War; about 37,300 black soldiers died fighting during the war.<sup>1</sup>

The formation of the first black regiment began when congress passed the Militia Act on 17 July 1862 which allowed blacks to serve as laborers to support the Union Army.<sup>2</sup> The Militia Act did not give blacks the right to fight as soldiers but only to conduct labor for the union forces. On 1 January 1863 President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation and publicly approved the use of blacks as soldiers.<sup>3</sup> Twenty-five days later, Secretary of War Edward Stanton signed a War

Department Order expanding the roles of blacks in the Civil War. The order authorized the recruitment of blacks to support the Union War effort.<sup>4</sup>

The Governor of Massachusetts immediately began recruiting blacks under the War Department Order before the government could reconsider. Thus, the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment became the first black regiment organized in the North after the Emancipation Proclamation became law. The regiment, however, "had to convince the white race that colored troops would fight, and not only that they would fight, but that they could be made, in every sense of the word, soldiers."<sup>5</sup>

#### Thesis Purpose

This thesis details the history of the formation of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment at Boston, Massachusetts, from 26 January 1863 to 15 June 1864.

#### Significance of Study

There is limited information available on black units during the Civil War. This thesis attempts to add to the amount of information on black units in the Civil War and to partially fill this historical gap. This study documents the history of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment's formation and addresses the following: What policies lead up to the formation of the regiment? How did the unit recruit personnel? What occurred during the first year of the unit's formation? This thesis is significant because it is a comprehensive documentation of the

events leading to the formation of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Infantry Regiment.

#### Limitations/Delimitations

The scope of research for this thesis is limited to the events which lead to the formation of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment. The period 26 January 1863 through 15 June 1864 covers the authorization to form the regiment in 1863, the activation of the regiment, the great assault on Fort Wagner, and the right of equal pay for black soldiers. This thesis focuses on some factors associated with the formation of the unit to include selecting officers, recruiting enlisted soldiers, and training the unit.

This thesis does not evaluate the methods and procedures used to recruit and train the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment. It also does not compare the formation of the regiment with the formation of any other regiment during the timeframe January 1863 through June 1864. This thesis focuses on presenting documented facts and events affecting the formation of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment.

The overview of the Black American military experience in Chapter IV provides only a brief summary of military and related events to provide the context for the formation of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment.

### Research Question

This thesis will focus on three research questions:

1. What events led to the formation of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment?
2. How did the Army recruit the personnel necessary to man the unit?
3. What were the problems and solutions associated with the formation of the Regiment?

### Thesis Organization

Chapter Two contains the review of literature. Chapter Three cites the research methodology used for the study. Chapter Four summarizes the Black American military experience up to the Civil War. The chapter further introduces the legislation which formed the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment. Chapter Five provides the history of the formation of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment in chronological sequence. Chapter Six contains conclusions and suggestions of areas for further study.

## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of the review of literature is to locate information applicable to the thesis questions. It is difficult to find literature written to preserve the history of the black units formed during the Civil War. However, I found it possible to reconstruct some of the history of the regiment by separating the literature into three categories. The literature on general military references comprises the first category, significant works which cover the American Revolution through the Civil War constitutes the second category, and Black American military literature is the third category. Additional references are included in the bibliography.

The information contained in this thesis was compiled from books, military records, letters, and newspaper articles related to the aforementioned subject. The thesis uses information from primary, secondary, and tertiary sources. Primary sources included Adjutant General Records and Luis F. Emilio's book on the regiment. Emilio served as a company commander in the regiment. Secondary sources include books on the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment and life for black soldiers during the Civil War. The tertiary sources include newspaper articles written about the regiment from 1863-65.

### General Reference Literature

This category includes general literature on the history of the United States Army from the American Revolution through the twentieth century and African-American history. The references provided necessary background and overview for the thesis.

In his two books Towards an American Army (1962) and History of the United States Army (1967) Russell F. Weigley focuses on the Army's institutional development. Both references survey military policy and provide a broad description of U.S. Military development, focusing particularly on those events and strategies that shaped U.S. military doctrine and policy.

Likewise, Maurice Matloff's American Military History (1924) is another general reference. Although less detailed than Weigley, Matloff's work provides an overview of the operational and institutional history of the Army.

Allan R. Millett and Peter Maslowski's For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States of America (1984) is also a comprehensive survey of the United States Army's policies and campaigns.

Another excellent narrative background source was Theodore Rodenbough's The Army of the United States (1896). This book is particularly useful because it provided background information on early regimental histories.

Gary A. Donaldson's The History of African-Americans in the Military (1991) was by far the most concise abbreviated

secondary source on the African-American military experience in America. The brief outline is supported by outstanding references and provides a concise report on the black military experience.

Similarly, The Historical and Cultural Atlas of African-Americans (1992) illustrated the societal development of African-Americans from slavery to 1990. It was particularly useful in describing the roles the frontier army played in the development of African-Americans in the military.

#### American Revolution to Civil War

Very few books cover African-American participation in the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812. There are, however, a few, such as James Bulluck's Black Patriots of the American Revolution (1986) and Joseph Thomas Wilson's The Black Phalanx. Wilson's Phalanx provided detailed descriptions of personal experiences and superb references.

Other excellent sources are Dudley T. Cornish's The Sable Arm (1966) and Joe H. May's published dissertation "Black Americans and their contributions Toward Union victory in the American Civil War, 1861-1865" (1983).

Now is Your Time (1991) by Walter Dean Myers compiles many original documents and first-hand accounts on the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment, as does Thomas W. Higginson's first-hand account of Army Life in a Black Regiment (1962).

### Blacks in the Military

The final category includes literature on the life of blacks in the military. Books on black history, especially those written about the black military experience, contained much of the information on the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment. Several of these books also contained information on how black soldiers contributed to American military campaigns during the early periods of the Colonial Period, War of 1812, and the Civil War. Books on black military experience that provide information pertinent to this thesis include John M. Carroll's The Black Military Experience, Edward Wakin's Black Fighting Men, Bernard Nalty's Strength for the Fight, James Dorman and Robert Jones' The Afro-American Experience, and the War Department's The Negro in Military Service of the United States. All of the above books were used to gain an overall understanding of how black soldiers were treated in the military prior to and during the Civil War.

### First-Hand Account

The literature on the evolution and history of the American military does not provide substantial information on the black regiment, although the unit played a major role in the army during the Civil War. Luis F. Emilio's History of the Fifty-Fourth Regiment filled a critical gap in the history by providing a first-hand account on the formation and accomplishment of the regiment.



Using Emilio's book, official government documents, letters, and correspondence as primary sources, I have documented the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment's formation. The available information is adequate to support and document the history of the regiment's formation.

The responsive library personnel and facilities at Fort Leavenworth, the Massachusetts Historical Society, in Boston Massachusetts, and the Leavenworth Public Library provided resources and invaluable acknowledgement.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses the historical research method. To understand the environment that led to the formation of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment I found it necessary to first look at the political and social issues from the Colonial Period through the Civil War. I researched primary and secondary sources on the Colonial Period through the Civil War to document the army organization and administrative policies. I also used the sources on the Colonial Period through the Civil War period to attempt to document the Army prior to and during the initial formation of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment. The sources detailed army missions, conditions, philosophy and reactions to the blacks in the military; subsequent research revealed the social and military resistance to the use and enlistment of blacks in the military. I focused mainly on conditions, philosophy and reactions to the blacks in the military from as early as the Colonial Period. From this basic research the context and disposition of the Army prior to and during the Civil War was established.

The major research concentrated on the events of the regiment's formation, and activities during the first year of activation. All available data from original documents,

manuscripts, and organizational records on the Fifth-Fourth was compiled. Particular emphasis was placed on: (1) officers and enlisted men of the regiment; (2) methods of recruitment; (3) training and initial formation of the regiment; and (4) critical events during the formation.

After gathering data from primary, secondary, and other sources related to the research questions, the information was examined and validated to establish facts and generalizations about the formation of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment.

The final step in the preparation of this thesis was to assemble the information in a chronological and logical order so that an accurate report was presented on the Brave Black Regiment.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Prior to 1863, black participation in the American military was limited. Societal tradition prohibited black Americans from military service during peacetime, but often required blacks to fight during wars because of manpower necessity.

This chapter provides the context for the formation of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment by summarizing the history of black Americans bearing arms in the United States military prior to January 1863, and addresses the black military experience during the colonial period, the American Revolution, the War of 1812, the Civil War, and concludes with the War Department Order authorizing the formation of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment.

#### Colonial Experiences (1639-1760)

Black service in the armed forces can be traced to militia units during the colonial period. There were many pockets of freed blacks throughout the colonies who had earned their freedom as indentured servants. Many of these colonies formed their militia from all able men, many of whom were black. In the Tidewater colonies, every available man, white and black,

free and slaves, served in the militia.<sup>6</sup> The militia units served as local armies, used mostly for fighting the indians. In the initial colonies, as long as there was a threat, all available men served in the militia to provide safety and security from the indians and unexpected European intervention. Blacks became the perceived threat as the indian and European threats diminished. After the introduction of slavery in most colonies, the colonists feared that blacks who fought in the militias might instigate slave revolts. As a result, a majority of the colonist took action to ensure that blacks trained in the militias would not be a threat and start slave revolutions.

In 1639, Virginia enacted legislation to limit military service to free white males. Massachusetts passed a similar law in 1656; Connecticut followed in 1661.<sup>7</sup> Within a five year period, all colonies enacted laws excluding blacks from militia service. South Carolina, on the other hand, passed an act which allowed plantation owners to recruit and arm slaves. It decreed that those slaves "by care and discipline, may be rendered serviceable towards the defense and preservation of this providence in case of actual invasion; and to make the assistance of our said trusty slaves more certain and regular."<sup>8</sup> Black participation in the militia unit varied and was not standard between colonies. A majority of the time the arming of blacks in the colonies was considered as a last resort or as a contingency in case of emergencies.

During the French and Indian War (1754-1763), the Northern colonies desperately needed manpower. The colonies revised the laws and required freed black men to serve in the local militias.<sup>9</sup> These temporary militias were not considered part of the American Army, and as a result, did not provide an avenue for freed black men to serve their country in a military career. Nevertheless, the early volunteers demonstrated the black american's resolve to serve his country when needed, as would soon happen in the Revolutionary War.

#### American Revolution Experiences (1775 - 1783)

At the beginning of the Revolutionary War the Continental Army was a small, loosely organized citizen-soldier force that did not have the support of all colonies. The Continental Army was outmanned by the British Army and had to augment itself with as many as five thousand black soldiers. The Revolutionary War was the first war fought by the Continental Army. The Revolutionary War proved to be a new opportunity for black soldiers to demonstrate their resolve to serve their country. The decision to use blacks was once again a matter of necessity. Ironically, a black man was the first to die during the events leading to the Revolutionary War. During a street protest on 5 March 1770, British soldiers shot Crispus Attucks and ten others in the streets of Boston, Massachusetts.<sup>10</sup>

Blacks participated in numerous protests against the British throughout the colonies, and fought in the battles at Concord, Lexington, and Bunker Hill. Estimates are that 5,000

black soldiers served during the Revolutionary War in integrated regiments, receiving many awards and decorations for their valor.<sup>11</sup>

Service of blacks during the Revolution was one of the first issues addressed by General George Washington when he took command of the Continental Army. On 12 November 1775, General George Washington prohibited the enlistment of blacks in the Continental Army.<sup>12</sup> General Washington did, however, allow blacks already serving to complete their enlistment. As the war continued, manpower shortages became critical, and necessity compelled General Washington and the colonies to enlist blacks. The Middle Atlantic and Northern states were the first to begin allowing blacks to enlist. Initially, only freed blacks were allowed to enlist. Later Northern states authorized slaves to enlist. As the War waged on, Southern states adopted similar policies and black enlistment soared. Also, many slave owners avoided military service by sending their slaves as substitutes. A combination of community pressure and lack of funds to pay for a substitute compelled free black men to serve in the military. Also, blacks volunteered and fought as a means to obtain their rights as citizens.<sup>13</sup>

During the Revolutionary War, the militia and Continental Army were not the only groups to take advantage of available black manpower. As the war continued, manpower shortages became critical for the British Army as well. In November 1775, Lord Dunmore, British Governor of Virginia, issued a proclamation

offering freedom to slaves who would escape bondage and join the British Army in Virginia. The proclamation also solicited free blacks to join the British Army in Virginia.<sup>14</sup> The manpower shortage in the British Army forced the British to find roles for free blacks and slaves in their Army. The British, like the Americans, solicited black participation in the war merely out of necessity to try and win the Revolutionary War. The British also viewed using blacks in the British Army as a means to weaken the colonies. Over three hundred slaves took advantage of the British offer and fought in the Revolutionary War against the Continental Army.<sup>15</sup>

At the end of the Revolutionary War, black militiamen, free blacks, and slaves were disarmed, and Congress again barred them from serving in the armed forces. The Congressional Militia Act of 1792 restricted military service to free able-bodied white male citizens.<sup>16</sup> Shortly after the enactment of the Congressional Act of 1792 all states enacted similar laws to eliminate blacks from state militias.

#### War of 1812 Experiences (1812-1815)

Although legally excluded from military service, blacks fought in the War of 1812.<sup>17</sup> The War of 1812 did not require as much manpower as did in the Revolutionary War. However, blacks still made a contribution. At the beginning of the War of 1812 the navy could not recruit enough white citizens to operate its ships, and recruited or pressed blacks into service aboard ships. The army initially barred blacks from service, however, as the



war waged on, the states again enlisted blacks out of necessity to man their militias. In 1812, Louisiana formed two battalions of free men of color, to defend New Orleans. New York was the first Northern state to enlist blacks when the state formed regiments of black men in 1814. In 1814 during the defense of New Orleans, Major General Andrew Jackson took advantage of the already trained black units in New Orleans to augment his force. Blacks made up a significant portion of the New Orleans population, and Jackson was able to increase his army by taking advantage of these large numbers and soliciting the support of the already trained and capable New Orleans Free Negro Battalion.<sup>18</sup> Also, in 1814 New York became the first northern state to enlist blacks and form black regiments to fight during the War of 1812.<sup>19</sup>

Jackson attempted to assure free blacks that they would be treated the same and would be paid the same amount of money as the white soldiers in his unit. The Negro battalion agreed to join Jackson's army to defend New Orleans. Jackson's two "colored battalions" fought valiantly on the front lines and contributed to the defeat of the British in New Orleans.<sup>20</sup> Jackson's treatment of blacks as equals in his army was the first attempt in military history to treat black soldiers as equal to white soldiers. Black soldiers proved at New Orleans that they could fight with white soldiers, and perform as well as white soldiers. Major Vincent Populas, the first black field grade

officer, also proved that black men could serve as officers in the United States Army.<sup>21</sup>

As the War of 1812 ended, the military reverted to old policies limiting black participation. The army once again prohibited blacks from serving. The Army General Regulations authorized only whites to serve, and the Congress would not change it during the years following the War of 1812.<sup>22</sup> In a letter to John White, the Speaker of the House of the Twenty-Seventh Congress, Secretary of War, J. C. Spencer addressed the current army policy with regards to blacks. The letter went on to stipulate "there are no blacks or colored persons serving as soldiers; but neither regulation or usage excludes them as mechanics, laborers, or servants, in any branches of the services where such force is required."<sup>23</sup> Free blacks would soon find themselves in these positions during the Civil War.

#### Civil War Experiences (1861-1863)

On 12 April 1861, the Civil War began at Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor, South Carolina.<sup>24</sup> The attack on the fort was considered an act of rebellion by President Abraham Lincoln, and he declared that the principle aim of the war was to restore the Union.

The Army policies for the recruitment and service of free blacks and slaves had not changed at the beginning of the Civil War. The Army General Regulations still did not allow blacks to serve in the military. There were, however, freemen in the

northern states who volunteered to join the Union Army and defend their country. Many of these volunteers were encouraged by a very active abolitionist movement in the North.<sup>25</sup>

Once again, despite government practices which were discriminatory against blacks in the service of their country, blacks responded to the call to defend the nation. Official government reasons justifying the prohibition of recruiting free blacks were never clearly documented. Freeman had previously demonstrated in the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812 they could hold their own on the battlefield and act as a force multiplier for the Union Army. A few generals did consider the use of freemen and slaves as soldiers but these actions were quickly overturned. In 1861 the Union government rejected black service. Secretary of War Simon Cameron declared "the War Department has no intention to call into service any colored soldiers."<sup>26</sup>

The Union and Confederates expected a short war and, as a result, President Lincoln requested 75,000 soldiers for only ninety days.<sup>27</sup> At the beginning, in 1861 young men in the North and the South had been eager to get into the war and fight for their beliefs. Southerners had flocked to enlist in the Confederate Army, and Northerners joined the Union Army. By the end of 1862 men on both sides were far less eager to get into the fight, particularly after the long list of men killed surfaced from the battles prior to 1862. The flood of volunteers slowed down to a trickle. In despair, the South was forced to begin

drafting men into the Confederate Army. The North, on the other hand, was not ready to do the same and continued with the volunteer army until 1863. As time passed it became clear that the North would not be able to man the Union Army because not enough white men had volunteered. White enlistments were not providing the required manpower so President Lincoln and other officials reversed their position on the use of black soldiers in the army.

The war continued to go badly for the Union, and finally on 17 July 1862 congress passed the Militia Act, authorizing enlistment of blacks as laborers and for construction duties to meet critical manpower shortages.<sup>28</sup> About one month later, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton authorized the recruitment of black soldiers for special combat units.<sup>29</sup> Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson of Massachusetts formed one the the first black special combat units authorized by the War Department. The regiment was called the First Carolina and was composed entirely of ex-slaves.<sup>30</sup> Soon afterwards several black regiments were formed with runaway slaves from Louisiana and South Carolina. The regiments became known as the *Corps d'Afrique*--the African troops.<sup>31</sup> The abolitionists did not believe the formation of these troops was sufficient and continued to fight for the widespread use of black soldiers in the Civil War.

"Let the slaves and free colored people be called into service, and formed into a liberation army!" urged Frederick Douglass,<sup>32</sup> a black abolitionist who had escaped from slavery.

Lincoln knew that blacks wanted to fight along side whites in regular Union Army units, and he knew they wanted to fight to end slavery. However, President Lincoln in 1861-1862 was still determined to keep slavery out of the war because he still hoped the south would rejoin the Union.

Then came the Second Battle of Bull Run, fought near Manassas, Virginia on 29 August 1862. The battle was a terrible lost for the North. "The defeat was so bad that it all but dried up the trickle of northern volunteers that had been joining the Union Army."<sup>33</sup> At this time the President had prepared a statement that would change the meaning of the war. Lincoln's advisors suggested that he wait until the North won a battle before he made his announcement--the Emancipation Proclamation.

On 17 September 1862, General Robert E. Lee led his Confederate Army out of Virginia and invaded the North. Northern and Southern soldiers met and fought in Maryland on the banks of Antietam Creek. In a bloody battle, the North forced Lee back into Virginia. Even though the North suffered a large number of losses, Lincoln was encouraged. Antietam seemed to be a Northern victory. In response, Lincoln made his announcement--his plan for an Emancipation Proclamation. Lincoln declared that after 1 January 1863, all slaves in territory held by the rebels would be forever free.<sup>34</sup> President Lincoln hoped the proclamation would force the confederates to stop fighting; if the confederates stopped fighting before 1 January 1863 they could keep their slaves.

Abolitionists and a majority in the north hailed the Proclamation. Very important for the north was one sentence from the Emancipation Proclamation. The sentence authorized the Union Army to use black men in the armed services of the United States.

After the Emancipation Proclamation became law on 1 January 1863, the Governor of Massachusetts, Governor John A. Andrew, visited Washington. As a result of a conference with Secretary Stanton, Governor Andrew received the following order, under which the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry was organized:

War Department  
Washington City  
January 26, 1863

Ordered: That Governor Andrew of Massachusetts is authorized, until further orders, to raise such number of volunteers, companies of artillery for duty in the forts of Massachusetts and elsewhere, and such corps of infantry for the volunteer military service as he may find convenient, such volunteers to be enlisted for three years, or until sooner discharged, and may include persons of African descent, organized into special corps. He will make the usual needful requisitions on the appropriate staff bureaus and officers, for the proper transportation, organization, supplies, subsistence, arms and equipments of such volunteers.

EDWIN M. STANTON,  
Secretary of War<sup>35</sup>

With this document Governor Andrew at once returned to Boston to begin recruiting under the Order. Governor Andrew was the first governor in the North to start raising black troops after the Emancipation Proclamation became law. Governor Andrew decided to call the regiment the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts

Volunteers, and meant to see that the regiment was a model unit. The Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Volunteers, later referred to as the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment, became the first black regiment of the north organized with free black volunteers.

CHAPTER FIVE  
THE FORMATION OF THE BRAVE BLACK REGIMENT

Officer Selection

Governor John Andrew was the first governor in the North to start recruiting black soldiers to help man the Union army, and he meant to see that it was a perfect unit. However, Governor Andrew immediately met a disappointment. The War Department ordered that the commissioned officers of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment be white. The noncommissioned officers could be black. Governor Andrew protested to the War Department because he felt it was unfair to have an all black unit with only white officers. Governor Andrew argued that the War Department was not affording blacks the opportunity to become commissioned officers. The Secretary of War was firm and insisted that all the officers from lieutenant to colonel had to be white, or the regiment would not be allowed to fight. In order to preserve the right to organize the first official sanctioned regiment of free black men of the North, Governor Andrew agreed.

Governor Andrew realized that he had to pick officers who had proved themselves in battle, but more importantly, men who had shown sympathy for black people through words and deeds. Governor Andrew went through the entire Massachusetts list



attempting to pick out the best and bravest white officers. The governor went over the list very carefully and picked Robert Gould Shaw to command the black regiment.

Robert Shaw was a captain in the 2nd Massachusetts Volunteers. He was twenty-four years' old, a Harvard University graduate, and in his two years of service had seen much action. Captain Robert Shaw was the son of an abolitionist. For this reason Governor Andrew believed Captain Shaw was the right white officer to led the black regiment.

To the governor's surprise and disappointment, Captain Shaw initially turned down the offer to become the colonel of the Fifth-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment. "I am flattered," the young captain wrote, "that you believe me worthy of leading black men into battle. . . . It is indeed an honor. . . . But I do not think myself qualified to accept . . . ." <sup>36</sup> Shaw felt sick at heart after turning the offer down, and after some soul-searching he reconsidered. Captain Shaw was a man who looked deep into himself, and after a few days he realized he had said no because he was afraid he would be looked down upon by his friends if he commanded a black regiment. Shaw was ashamed of the reason he had turned the governor down and felt even worse when he learned that Captain Norwood Hallowell, who was as educated, as rich, and just as much a gentlemen as Captain Shaw, had jumped at the chance to be second in command of the black regiment. Captain Shaw took another close look at why he had refused. Then he wrote to Annie Haggerty, a New York abolitionist, whom Shaw would later marry.

Captain Shaw wrote her because he wanted her to know what he had done and why. "To my own shame," he wrote in his letter, "I now see I dreaded what people would say about my entering the Negro regiment. I was thinking of you as well as myself. You will soon be my bride. I could not bear for you to suffer because of me."<sup>37</sup>

Instead of answering Shaw's letter, Annie took the train to Alexandria, Virginia, where he was in winter quarter. Annie went to Alexandria because she felt she had to say what was on her mind and could not trust herself to put down on paper what she really needed to tell her future husband.

"Robert," she said, "you are not to worry about me. You have to do what is right--and that's all. When black men go into battle, they must be commanded by men who are not prejudiced against them. They must be led by men like you, not by men who would enter a black regiment just because it meant promotion for them. Robert, you belong with the 54th. There lies your fate and mine!"<sup>38</sup>

Captain Shaw was happy to hear this from Annie, because his friends had urged him to stay with the 2nd Massachusetts and not to join the Fifth-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment; but Annie had shown him that he belonged with the Fifth-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment. Shaw immediately sent Governor Andrew a telegram: "Disregard my letter. It will be my privilege to command the 54th Massachusetts Volunteers if the post is still open."<sup>39</sup> Governor Andrew sent a return telegram stating that his name had been sent to the War Department and that he had asked that Captain Robert Gould Shaw be granted a temporary commission as colonel in the United States Volunteers.

Robert Gould Shaw arrived in Boston on 15 February 1863 with colonel's eagles on his shoulders instead of captain's bars, and at once assumed the duties of his position as commander of the Fifth-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment. When Colonel Shaw arrived in Boston, Captain Hallowell was already there engaged daily in the executive business of the regiment; and later that month, his brother, Edward N. Hallowell, who had served as a lieutenant in the Twentieth Massachusetts Infantry, reported for duty and was made major of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment.<sup>40</sup> When other white officers heard that Colonel Shaw was commanding the Fifth-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment, they rushed to join the regiment. Colonel Shaw had set an example for other white officers to follow. It soon became an honor to belong to the Fifth-Massachusetts Regiment not only because it was a black regiment, but because Colonel Robert Gould Shaw was its commander.

By March 1863, Governor Andrew had personally appointed 29 white officers to serve in the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment. "Line-officers were commissioned from persons nominated by commanders of regiments in the field, by tried friends of the movement, the field-officers, and those Governor Andrew personally desired to appoint."<sup>41</sup> All of the officers were young, the average age was 23, and 14 of them had already been in battle. Many of the officers were well educated, wealthy, and well known in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. Although not all of the 29 officers were abolitionists, most had strong anti-

slavery feelings, and were eager to serve in a black regiment. The officers of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment were everything Governor Andrew could have wished for, but thus far, the regiment existed on paper only. Soldiers had to be recruited.

### Recruiting

After a review of the freed black male population in Massachusetts, it soon became clear to Governor Andrew and Colonel Shaw that a full regiment of black soldiers could not possibly be raised in Massachusetts. Massachusetts could probably enlist as many as 394 black men. Boston could probably raise one company and New Bedford could probably raise a second company. Soon it became clear that a full regiment probably could not even be raised in all of New England. Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Connecticut did not have a large enough population of freed black men to draw from. Governor Andrew, however, would not be discouraged. The governor immediately called on his old friend George Stearns to help recruit black soldiers for the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment. Stearns was a rich man and an active abolitionist who had helped John Brown raise money for his raid on Harper's Ferry.

George Stearns immediately began to work on recruiting black men for the regiment. Stearns organized a group of people to help him. One member of the group was Francis G. Shaw, Colonel Shaw's father. "What we need," the group decided, "is to let people know. Let's get money together for leaflets and

posters. Let's put up notices in every part of the country. Let's advertise in the newspapers."<sup>42</sup> In Massachusetts, daily newspapers ran ads like the following.

TO COLORED MEN:

Wanted! Good men for the 54th regiment of Massachusetts Volunteers of Africa Descent. Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, commanding. \$100 bounty at expiration of term of service. Pay \$13 a month and State aid for families. All necessary information can be obtained at the office, Corner Cambridge and North Russell Streets.

Lieut. J. W. M. Appleton  
Recruiting Officer<sup>43</sup>

George Stearns and his recruiting group did not stop with newspaper ads. Because of his role as an active abolitionist Stearns knew nearly all of the black men in the country who were fighting for black equality, and he asked them to help recruit black men for the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment. Free African leaders took up the appeal. The free African leaders included Martin Delaney, Charles L. Redmond, William Wells Brown, Henry Garnet, and Frederick Douglass, whose sons enlisted. Many of these men felt that black participation in the Civil War would force white people to treat black people with fairness. Stearns was especially happy to get help from Frederick Douglass because, Frederick Douglass, more than any other black during this period believed that black men could fight their way to citizenship. Lewis and Charles Douglass were the first black men from New York State to join the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment and because of his sons' enlistment, Frederick Douglass developed a warm spot in his heart for the regiment, and he was only too happy to help

recruit other black men to join the regiment. Frederick Douglass traveled all over the North speaking to black men. Frederick Douglass told all the black men with whom he spoke that the time had come and strong black arms must now tear down the slaves house.<sup>44</sup> On one occasion, Frederick Douglass told the black men to whom he was speaking, "We can get at the throat of treason and slavery through Massachusetts," he said. "She was first in the War of Independence; first to break the chains of her slaves; first to make the black man equal before the law; first to admit colored children to her common schools. . . . Massachusetts now welcomes you as her soldiers."<sup>45</sup>

George Stearns and his recruiting group roamed far in search for black soldiers. Recruiting stations were set up in all parts of the East and as far west as Chicago. The appeal to black men outside Massachusetts brought immediate results. Even black men who had escaped to Canada with the help of the Underground Railroad, and had faced the dangers and the terrible hardships of the flight from slavery left their homes in Canada and came back to fight with the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment. By the end of April 1863, black recruits were coming in at about 30 to 40 per day, and Governor Andrew soon had enough men to for the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment.<sup>46</sup>

Even as the black volunteers rolled in, there were many in the north who believed a black regiment would never work. There were even Union Army officers who thought the idea was wrong and felt that black men would run if and when they were

given the opportunity to fight. There were also many people in the North who wanted the South to win, and were referred to as *Copperheads*. The *Copperheads* hated President Lincoln, and they attacked him in the newspaper as often as they possible could. The editor of the New York Daily News could not stand the idea of a black regiment and in one of his editorials wrote, "what evil would Lincoln thrust upon us next? That man Lincoln would do anything to win the support of the ignorant blacks!"<sup>47</sup>

Those who were against the idea of a black regiment did not stop with their words alone. They did everything they could do to stop the recruiting of black volunteers for the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment. Gangs organized around the recruiting stations and tried to frighten away the recruiting officers. Lieutenant James W. Grace, a recruiting officer in New Bedford, Massachusetts, did all he could to keep his recruiting office open despite gangs throwing rocks through the windows of his headquarters and attacking black men going in to enlist. After a while Lieutenant Grace even began to carry a gun to protect himself and his recruits. Lieutenant Grace said he would shoot down the next *Copperhead* who tried to interfere with his legal and authorized duty.<sup>48</sup> The attacks, however, went on until Governor Andrew posted an armed guard at the New Bedford recruiting station.

Despite the attacks, black men who wanted to enlist were not frightened away. Every black man who wanted to be a soldier, however, was not enlisted. Many black men were turned down

because they could not pass the medical exam. The exam was harder to pass than the usual physical test given to white soldiers. The doctor in charge, Surgeon Lincoln R. Stone said, "We want only perfect men. Our lads will be physically and mentally fit for combat."<sup>49</sup> Surgeon Stone, like every person associated with recruiting black men for the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment, believed the men of the regiment could not be good but had to be the best because the eyes of the nation were on them. The surgeons weeded men out, but enough black men volunteered and the regiment continued to grow. By the end of April 1863, nine hundred men had passed the medical test; the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment was complete, and the recruiting stations closed their doors. Finally, the brave black regiment of the North was formed and ready to begin its training as a regiment.

#### Training

On 21 February 1863, Lieutenant E. N. Hallowell and twenty-seven recruits from the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment took possession of the buildings assigned to the new regiment.<sup>50</sup> The training quarters for the regiment had to be prepared prior to the arrival of the first black recruits of the regiment. Until the quarters were ready the black recruits were housed at the Armory in Boston. The regiment would train at Camp Meigs, in the small town of Readville, a few miles south of Boston. Camp Meigs was also the camp where the white officers of the regiment had conducted their basic training.



When Lieutenant Hallowell and the twenty-seven recruits of the regiment arrived at Camp Meigs the skies were gray, rain was threatening, and it was cold. The trees were bare and the ground was frozen. Most disheartening of all, however, were the quarters that had been assigned to the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment. Lieutenant Hallowell was filled with anger when he inspected the quarters. The quarters were the worst in Camp Meigs. The twenty-seven recruits looked around at the gloomy and run down quarters, at the broken windows, sagging roofs, and peeling walls, and could not believe that they were assigned such poor quarters. The supply sheds and mess halls were in equally poor shape, but not one of the recruits grumbled. Lieutenant Hallowell and the twenty-seven recruits realized there was no time for complaining because the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment was scheduled to leave Boston for Camp Meigs in mid-March. Lieutenant Hallowell tried to sound more cheerful than he felt and told the recruits he would wire Colonel Shaw to send additional crew at once, so they could get the place in shape before the regiment arrived. Lieutenant Hallowell knew that back in the Boston Armory, the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment had additional recruits who could do everything that needed to be done to get the quarters ready prior to mid-March.<sup>51</sup>

When Colonel Shaw received word from Lieutenant Hallowell, he immediately turned to Governor Andrew for help because he knew that there was nothing the governor would not do or get if the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment needed it.

Without delay, Governor Andrew ordered lumber, paint, pipes, and tools rushed to Camp Meigs to get the quarters up to suitable living conditions as quickly as possible. A work crew of recruits from the regiment to include carpenters, stone masons, plumbers, housepainters, and plasterers arrived immediately and began to renovate the long neglected barracks. After several days of continuous work the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment had the neatest quarters in Camp Meigs.

Meanwhile back in Boston, Colonel Shaw was busy shipping food, clothing, weapons, and ammunition to Camp Meigs. Colonel Shaw also ensured sheets, blankets, medical supplies, and a thousand and one other things were taken care of before departing to camp. Colonel Shaw was faced with several last minute problems, nevertheless, the enlisted men and the officers of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment marched from the Boston Armory to the railroad station on 14 March 1863 enroute to Camp Meigs as scheduled. At the station, a special train was waiting to take the newly formed regiment to Readville. Friends and relatives of the soldiers crowded around the train to see the regiment off. Exactly at noon, the train departed Boston enroute to Readville. Two hours later, the men of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment arrived at Readville. Small groups of townspeople watched with serious faces as the black soldiers and white officers unloaded the train. The people of Readville watched cautiously because Readville had never seen black soldiers before, and wanted to witness the black regiment as it

unloaded the train and prepared to march to Camp Meigs. The men to the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment had to march nearly five miles from Readville to Camp Meigs, but no-one complained because the day was pleasant with not a cloud in the sky, and the sun shined bright. "It's a good omen," Colonel Shaw wrote to Annie that night. "This has been the first pleasant day we've had for weeks."<sup>52</sup>

Camp Meigs, like the world outside, was full of white people who did not like black people. Many white soldiers were also training at Camp Meigs, and were very rude and insulting to the black soldiers of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment. Every time a company of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment appeared on the drill field or rifle range, the white soldiers mocked the black soldiers. The Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment quickly began to "shape up," and within two weeks the jeering from the white soldiers stopped.<sup>53</sup>

After a few weeks of training at Camp Meigs many of the white soldiers began to change their opinion about the black soldiers of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment. A few white soldiers wrote home to their families and told them that they were wrong about the black regiment. The white soldiers said the black soldiers were not lazy and shiftless, but a fine bunch of hard working men who wanted to do their best and fight for the Union. The white soldiers at Camp Meigs began to admit that Colonel Shaw's black soldiers were showing themselves to be equally capable as white soldiers. Their discipline was

considered one of the best at Camp Meigs. Everyone knew that among the white soldiers there were many cases of disobedience. White soldiers often got drunk and were disorderly. However, in the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment there was almost no discipline trouble of this kind. "From the outset, the regiment showed great interest in drilling, and on guard duty it was always vigilant and active. The barracks, cook-house, and kitchens far surpassed in cleanliness . . . and were models of neatness and good order."<sup>54</sup>

Not all of the men in the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment, however, were well behaved. Some of the black recruits did not like army life. Many of the black recruits had been free men long before the Emancipation Proclamation became law, and had risked death to escape from slavery because they wanted no master. Now, in the army, they were once again told how to stand, when to sit, where to go, and what to do. The discipline in the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment was strict and not every black recruit could take it. The number who broke the rules, however, was far less than that in white regiments at Camp Meigs. "It was remarked that there was less drunkenness in this regiment [the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment] than in any that had ever left Massachusetts."<sup>55</sup>

After several weeks watching the regiment train, Colonel Shaw did not doubt that the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment would behave well under fire. Colonel Shaw, however, would not be satisfied if his men merely did well when their time came to

"see the elephant," [to go into battle] he wanted his regiment to do better than the *Corps d'Afrique* who had fought the Confederate in the South earlier during the Civil War, and had won much praise.<sup>56</sup> Colonel Shaw knew that soldiers often lost battles and suffered many losses because they were poorly trained. Colonel Shaw told Lieutenant Hallowell that the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts must go into combat fully prepared, and must know what to do when they reach the front.<sup>57</sup> To ensure the soldiers of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment was prepared to see the elephant, Colonel Shaw planned a rigorous training schedule for his regiment that other soldiers may have rebelled against. The black soldiers of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment, however, did not rebel; the regiment took the training and liked it. People who visited Camp Meigs noticed the difference in training between the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment and the other regiments. Many visitors were impressed by the spirit of the black regiment. The "ladies committee" from Massachusetts, headed by Mrs Andrew, visited the regiment on 21 April 1863 and were extremely impressed by the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment. On 30 April 1863, Governor Andrew and Secretary Chase visited the regiment and were also very impressed by the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment, and commented on the difference they noticed between the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment and other regiments training at Camp Meigs.<sup>58</sup>

Colonel Shaw pushed his men hard, but seldom had any commander had troops so eager to learn how to soldier. The

Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment learned how to assault and hold a position; to dig-in; to attack in column, platoon, and company front. The regiment also learned cover and concealment; fire and movement; and how to use the bayonet and rifle butt. Finally the regiment was taught how to scout, patrol, and march at night. The regiment also spent "a great deal of time. . . on the rifle range and most of the men became good shots."<sup>59</sup> Colonel Shaw felt that he had the right to be proud of his regiment, and after the black soldiers had been at Camp Meigs for six weeks he wrote the governor a report. In his report Colonel Shaw wanted to share his feeling with Governor Andrew and wrote, "everything goes well for us. The intelligence of the men is high. Their devotion to duty knows no bounds. They have learned soldiering more readily than most. There is no doubt that we shall leave the state with as good a regiment as any which has marched since the outbreak of the war."<sup>60</sup> Colonel Shaw really felt that the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment would be the best regiment that had marched out of the state of Massachusetts, but was reluctant to tell this to the governor at this early phase of the regiment's training.

As a result of the rigid health rules enforced by the regiment's surgeons, and the fact that the men were willing to obey the health rules; the black soldiers of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment were robust, strong, and healthy. At Camp Meigs, some units paid little attention to health rules. Latrines were often placed in the wrong place, often so close to

places where drinking water came from that sewage got into the water. Food was badly cared for, became spoiled and was still served to the soldiers. Some of the soldiers did not bathe, and were not made to bathe. Units that were careless about health regulations were hit hard by illness, and the death rates in these units was high. The health record of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment, on the otherhand, was exemplary.

Surgeon-General Dale, of Massachusetts, reported

"from the outset, the regiment [Fifth-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment] showed great interest in drilling, and on guard duty it was vigilant and active. The barracks, cook-house, and kitchens far surpassed in cleanliness any I have ever witnessed, and were models of neatness and good order. . . . it is my dispassionate and honest conviction that no regiments were more amenable to good discipline, or were more decorous and proper in their behavior than the Fifty-Fourth."<sup>61</sup>

The unit surgeon and company commanders alike enforced Colonel Shaw's strict policies and contributed to the regiments excellent health record. On several occasions company commanders in the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment inspected the barracks using strict standards checking corners, and "raised hell" when they found the smallest deficiency.<sup>62</sup> Colonel Shaw's soldiers were strong, healthy, and proud that they had the best health record at Camp Meigs. A black soldier wrote home, "We aim to be the finest regiment in the whole army! And we're going to do it!"<sup>63</sup>

The Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment did not get to be a top-notch unit without great effort. Colonel Shaw and his officers worked late every evening preparing for the next day's training. No details were overlooked, and no weakness were

passed over. The officers pushed hard, and the black soldiers gave all they had. After achieving the recognition as one of the most disciplined regiment at Camp Meigs by Surgeon-General Dale, hardly a week went by without the regiment drilling before congressmen, senators, or other high ranking officials. The black soldiers had worked hard to be the best, and did not mind showing how good they were. The regimental band played and the soldiers passed in review with their heads high and in line. Sergeant Major Lewis Douglass, a son of Fredrick Douglass, believed it was not just the magnificent way the black soldiers looked or the perfect way they marched that impressed spectators, but there was something inside the men that came through. Sergeant Major Douglass believed each man in the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment marched as though he was marching for all black people.<sup>64</sup>

In May 1863, Colonel Shaw reported to Governor Andrew that his regiment was ready to carry out any mission.<sup>65</sup> The governor was pleased and arranged to present the regiment with its colors. On 18 May 1863, vistors poured into Camp Meigs to witness the black soldiers of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment graduate, and see the regiment receive its colors. After this the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment became an official fighting unit for the Union.<sup>66</sup> Governor Andrew, the mayor of Boston, and many famous antislavery fighters to include Wendell Phillips, William Lloyd Garrison, and Frederick Douglass were present at the ceremony. Many other important people were present among them merchants, bankers, and professional people



who had served on the Stearns Committee. Also present and mingling with the rich and the well-known were the parents, friends, wives, and sweethearts of the black soldiers.

Reveille sounded at 5 a.m. that morning, about 45 minutes earlier than usual, and the black men of the regiment were excited about their upcoming graduation ceremony. After eating breakfast, the soldiers polished their brass, shined their shoes, cleaned their weapons, and cleaned up their barracks and the grounds. Every man's spirit was high as each company in the regiment moved to the drill field and massed in parade formation. The line was formed at eleven o'clock and the regiment was broken into square by Colonel Shaw.<sup>67</sup> Governor Andrew and his military staff took position in front of the regiment with four flags furled. One by one the governor handed the flags to Colonel Shaw; a state flag, a national flag, and two regimental flags. In turn, Colonel Shaw passed the flags to the color bearers of the regiment. The flag bearers unfurled the banners and then marched back into place at the center of the regimental formation. The flags waved in the breeze, revealing the design of the regimental colors: On a white silk was a figure of the Goddess of Liberty surrounded by the words "*Liberty, Unity, and Loyalty,*" and another with a cross upon a blue field, and the motto, *In Hoc Signo Vincas*, meaning You conquer in this sign.<sup>68</sup>

When the flag bearers were in position, Governor Andrew made a speech. Then, Frederick Douglass and a few other important people addressed the regiment. At the conclusion of

the Governor's speech Colonel Shaw spoke for the men of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment. He said little, but his words were touching:

Your Excellency:

We accept these flags with feelings of deep gratitude. They will remind us not only of the cause we are fighting for, and of our country, but of the friends we have left behind us, who have thus far taken so much interest in this regiment, and whom we know will follow us in our career. Though the greater number of men in this regiment are not Massachusetts men, I know there is not one who will not be proud to fight and serve under our flag. May we have an opportunity to show that you have not made a mistake in intrusting the honor of the State to a colored regiment,--the first State that has sent one to the war. I am very glad to have this opportunity to thank the officers and men of the regiment for their untiring fidelity and devotion to their work from the very beginning. They have shown that sense of the importance of the undertaking without which we should hardly have attained our end.<sup>69</sup>

After Colonel Shaw's speech Governor Andrew and his distinguished guest reviewed the regiment and then, the regiment was dismissed. Following the dismissal, the men of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment celebrated with their families and guest. Later that day the Secretary of War telegraphed Governor Andrew and ordered that the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment report to General Hunter, Commander of the Department of the South for combat duty in South Carolina.<sup>70</sup>

When Colonel Shaw informed the soldiers about the telegraph they broke ranks and cheered. The black soldiers of the regiment began to realized that at last their time had come to prove themselves as Union soldiers. On 28 May 1863, the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment assembled for the last time at Camp Meigs, and then marched to the railroad station in

Readville. "As the companies filed into the street from the station, the command was received with cheers from a large gathering."<sup>71</sup> All along the route to the railroad station the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment received repeated cheers from gathering crowds. Other units from Camp Meigs also came out to bid the regiment good-bye. White soldiers saluted and the color guards of the white units dipped their guidons as the black soldiers marched along the dusty road to Readville.

#### Off to War

At Readville a special train was waiting on the tracks for the regiment to load. The men of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment got aboard shouting farewell to the townspeople who had gathered to see the regiment off. "The citizens of Readville were proud of the 54th too. Women came over to the train windows and handed the men bags of cookies. Men passed out cigars and tobacco to the soldiers."<sup>72</sup> The send-off at Readville was nothing compared to the reception awaiting the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment in Boston. When the train arrived in Boston's North Station, thousands of people lined the streets. From North Station the soldiers marched to the State House and Boston Common. The Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment was led by the Boston police directly to the State House. As the regiment marched towards the State House the cheering never stopped. Many regiments had marched through Boston, but never had soldiers been so well received like the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment. One journalist said:

No regiment has collected so many thousands as the Fifty-Fourth. Vast crowds lined the streets where the regiment was to pass, and the Common was crowded with an immense number of people such as only the Fourth of July or some rare event causes to assemble. . . . No white regiment from Massachusetts has surpassed the Fifty-fourth in excellence of drill, while in general discipline, dignity, and military bearing the regiment is acknowledged by every candid mind to be all that can be desired.<sup>73</sup>

On the steps of the State House, Colonel Shaw's parents and his wife Annie, the colonel and his sweetheart had been married two weeks prior, stood among the spectators. Annie stood there waving a small American Flag with tears in her eyes cheering for the regiment. Colonel Shaw's mother also stood with tears in her eyes as her son passed by leading his black regiment. After the regiment stopped in front of the State House, Governor Andrew addressed the black soldiers. Governor Andrew was followed by abolitionist Wendall Phillips who wished the black regiment godspeed, then Frederick Douglass spoke. Frederick Douglass said,

"my brothers, you are going off to fight the slavemasters. When you are in battle remember the shame, the disgrace, the degradation of slavery! Remember, that in your hands is held the salvation of the black people of America. For once you have spent your blood, no black man will ever again be enslaved. I am too old to go with you. But my sons are in your ranks. Go into battle boldly, my brothers! Smash the chains of slavery! Smash them!"

Fredrick Douglass then turned, choked with emotion, then said, "God bless you all!"<sup>74</sup>

After all the speeches were completed, the officers of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment and their guests were invited into the State House where they had lunch, while the black soldiers had lunch on the Boston Common. The luncheon

lasted about one hour, then Colonel Shaw parted from his wife and parents, the officers reported to their companies, and the soldiers shook hands with relatives and friends and moved to their respective company formations. The Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment then marched to Battery Wharf where the transport vessel, De Molay, awaited the regiment's arrival. Again large crowds watched as company by company the troops filed aboard the transport vessel. At about one o'clock in the afternoon the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment embarked on the De Molay, and at about four o'clock the vessel slowly turned and moved from the wharf enroute to South Carolina.<sup>75</sup> The Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment was off to take part in the Civil War.

The De Molay was a clean vessel of the latest design. The officers shared large rooms and ate their meals in a splendid dining room. The quarters for the enlisted men were not as good, but the soldiers were comfortable and the food was good and plentiful. Very few of the black soldiers aboard the vessel had ever been on an ocean-going vessel before, but luckily the weather was fine all the way to South Carolina and very few got sea sick.

The following roster gives the names of the officers with their respective rank and assignment who departed with the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment on 28 May 1863:

Colonel,-- Robert G. Shaw  
Major,-- Edward N. Hallowell  
Surgeon,-- Lincoln R. Stone  
Assistant-Surgeon,-- Charles B. Bridgham

Adjutant,-- Garth W. James  
Quartermaster,-- John Ritchie

Company A.  
Capt., John W. M. Appleton  
1st Lieut., Wm. H. Homans

Company F.  
Capt., Watson W. Bridge  
2d Lieut., Alexander  
Johnston

Company B.  
Capt., Samuel Willard  
1st Lieut., James M. Walton  
2d Lieut., Thomas L. Appleton

Company G.  
1st Lieut., Orin E. Smith  
2d Lieut., James A. Pratt

Company C.  
1st Lieut., James W. Grace  
2d Lieut., Benjamin F. Dexter

Company H.  
Capt., Cabot J. Russel  
2d Lieut., Willard Howard

Company D.  
Capt., Edward L. Jones  
1st Lieut., R.H.L. Jewett

Company I.  
Capt., George Pope  
1st Lieut., Higginson  
2d Lieut., Charles E.  
Tucker

Company E.  
Capt., Luis F. Emilio  
2d Lieut., David Reid

Company K.  
Capt., William H. Simpkins  
2d Lieut., Littlefield

Lewis H. Douglass, son of Fredrick Douglass, was the original sergeant-major. Arthur B. Lee, of Company A, was made commissary-sergeant; and Theodore J. Becker, hospital steward.<sup>76</sup>

On 3 June 1863 the De Molay dropped anchor in Port Royal outside the harbor of Charleston, where some twenty other Union ships were anchored. "Colonel Shaw, personally reporting to General Hunter, [and] was ordered to proceed to Beaufort and disembark."<sup>77</sup> At about 4 p.m. the De Molay sailed for Beaufort. The Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment was sixty miles south of Charleston and no-one seemed to know why.

The next day at 5 a.m., the regiment debarked. The town of Beaufort was still sleeping as the black soldiers marched

through. The Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment marched four to five miles to an abandoned plantation where they camped. After arriving at the plantation the soldiers of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment began to realize that they were in for a rough time. It was drizzling, the ground was swampy, the rations had not arrived yet, and there were no tents to sleep in. For four days the men suffered, encamped in a mosquito-infested area. Most of the time they had nothing to eat except tack and black coffee. Positioned near the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment were two regiments of the Colored Troops, as the *Corps d'Afrique* were now called.

Colonel Shaw and his staff tried to find a better location for the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment to camp, but were unsuccessful. Colonel Shaw, however, was outraged when he discovered that the white soldiers were stationed in an excellent location; where there was no mosquitoes and no swampy ground. Colonel Shaw also discovered that there was plenty of space available in the same area near the white soldiers. Only the U.S. Colored Troops and the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts had been sent to camp on a mosquito-infested swamp. Colonel Shaw protested to the officer-in-charge of positioning the units, but "no attention was paid to his complaint."<sup>78</sup> While in Beaufort, the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment also received its first taste of war; the black soldiers were sent out on the shell road to work on fortifications.<sup>79</sup> Colonel Shaw protested angrily to the commander, but nothing was done to improve the living conditions

of the regiment or to send to regiment to the front to fight. Colonel Shaw refused to allow his soldiers to live in a mosquito-infested swamp, and to build fortifications instead of fight. So, Colonel Shaw decided to wire Governor Andrew and inform the governor of the living conditions of the regiment, and the work the regiment was performing.

Governor Andrew immediately contacted the Secretary of War, and informed the Secretary of War that he would recall the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment unless the situation was corrected at once. Since the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment was not sworn into federal service yet, and was still under state control, Governor Andrew could recall the regiment if he desired. The Secretary of War did not want to lose the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment and acted promptly. Suddenly the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment began to receive supplies; tents, cots, and rations. The quartermaster had these supplies all the time, but withheld the supplies from the black soldiers until the Secretary of War intervened.<sup>80</sup> The black soldiers of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment understood clearly what was happening to the regiment. The black soldiers also began to realize that they could trust Colonel Shaw to act on their behalf; and as a result of Colonel Shaw's actions, the spirit of his men remained very high.

On 6 June 1863, Colonel Shaw recieved orders to leave Beaufort and to report to Colonel Montgomery at Simon's Island, a few miles off the coast of Georgia. On 8 June, after a rainy



night, the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment marched to the wharf, embarked once again on the De Molay, and at 5.30 p. m. was enroute to Simon's Island. "After a rather rough voyage of some eighty miles during the night, the De Molay dropped anchor at 6 a.m. in the sound off the southern point of St. Simon's Island."<sup>81</sup> Colonel Shaw immediately reported to Colonel Montgomery for orders. The black soldiers, meanwhile, enjoyed the island. There were flowers, trees, and birds everywhere; and the camp quarters assigned to the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment were perfect. The soldiers had tents, cots, field kitchens, and plenty of rations.

The day after the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment arrived on St. Simon's Island, the regiment was sworn into federal service. The Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment became part of a brigade that included the 1st and 2nd South Carolina; the U.S. Colored Troops from Beaufort. The commander of the brigade was General James Montgomery. General Montgomery was a rough fighter who had powerful friends in the War Department who helped him get his command. Colonel Shaw immediately thought that General Montgomery was trouble because the general was rude and insulting to both the officers and the men of the black units.

On 10 June 1863, "hurried preparations were at once made, and at 6 p.m. eight companies of the regiment embarked on the Sentinel. Companies F and C were left behind as a camp guard."<sup>82</sup> The Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment (minus) along with five

companies of the 2nd South Carolina were called upon to carry out a combat mission. The units were ordered to make a raid on Darien, a village on the coast of Georgia. A small Confederate force was thought to be camped there. General Montgomery wanted to see the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment in action and decided to accompany the expedition to Darien. At 3 p.m. on 11 June 1863, the soldiers landed with no resistance. On approaching Darien, the men advanced cautiously in formation. In the small village were some white-washed frame houses, a church, a post office, and a general store. As the soldiers approached, they again met no resistance. A house-to-house search was performed and the soldiers found no sign of Confederate soldiers in the village. The village was deserted. General Montgomery was furious and ordered Colonel Shaw to burn the village down. Colonel Shaw was shocked and questioned why the village had to be burned. "The reasons he gave me [Colonel Shaw] for destroying Darien were that the Southerners must be made to feel that this was a real war, and that they were to be swept away by the hand of God like the Jews of old."<sup>83</sup>

Colonel Shaw decided that he had no choice. General Montgomery was his commander, and to disobey an order from the general would mean serious trouble. Reluctantly, Colonel Shaw ordered one company to help the 2nd South Carolina burn the village down. When Colonel Shaw returned to camp he wrote "two official letters bearing upon this expedition."<sup>84</sup> Colonel Shaw wrote Governor Andrew, giving a detailed account of the event,

and wrote Lieutenant Colonel Halpine of the Tenth Army Corps, and Department of the South. The reply from the Department of the South was short and clear. Colonel Shaw was to obey the orders of his superior officer without question. Colonel Shaw and the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment were fortunate, and on 23 June orders came for the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment to report at Hilton Head, an island close to South Carolina.

During the afternoon and evening of 24 June 1863, the regiment was taken by company on the Mayflower to the ocean steamer Ben Deford, and then sailed early the next day for Hilton Head.<sup>85</sup> It was raining as the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment docked on the wharf at Hilton Head Island. The Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment, then marched a mile and camped in an old cotton-field. There were several other regiments on Hilton Head Island preparing for future operations. The post was commanded by Brigadier General George C. Strong, an anti-slavery abolitionist, like Colonel Shaw. While at this camp the living conditions of the regiment were once again excellent and the spirit of the black soldiers were high. While awaiting further orders, the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment made use of the time by drilling. On 30 June 1863, the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment was mustered for pay.

#### Pay Problem

Until now, the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment had been paid by the State of Massachusetts. Now for the first time the black soldiers of the regiment were going to receive their

wages from the federal government. As the men lined up for pay, "It was . . . rumored that the terms of enlistment would not be adhered to by the Government."<sup>86</sup>

The pay officer sat with the paysheet ready to check off each man's name as he received his month's wages. As the first black soldier stepped forward to receive his pay, he soon learned that he was down on the paysheet for only \$10. Before this, each of the black soldiers had received the full \$13 a month which was the amount soldiers were entitled. The pay officer informed the black soldiers that \$10 was the amount that the federal government had authorized to pay black soldiers and that was the amount on the paysheet from the government. The pay officer assured the black soldiers he had nothing to do with the amount. The War Department had decided that soldiers of African descent were to be paid \$10 a month, not \$13 like white soldiers. Also, \$3 out of the \$10 was deducted for clothing. So, in actuality black soldiers were really getting only \$7 a month compared to \$13 a month for white soldiers.

Colonel Shaw was outraged and questioned the pay officer as to why white soldiers got paid \$13 a month and black soldiers got paid only \$10 a month. The pay officer assured Colonel Shaw he was not responsible and was only carrying out his orders. Colonel Shaw tried to explain the situation to his men. He told his black soldiers that there was no good reason why they should get less pay than white soldiers, and he was going to try and get the pay problem fixed immediately.

The black soldiers of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment took a vote, and all agreed that every black soldier in the regiment would refuse to accept pay. The black soldiers argued that the government was not acting in good faith. They said when they enlisted, they had been told that the pay was \$13 a month and it included state aid for their families.<sup>87</sup> At the same time, the black soldiers told Colonel Shaw that they had not enlisted for the sake of the money and would continue to serve under his command without pay until the federal government paid them the same as white soldiers. Colonel Shaw was proud of his regiment's decision. He believed the federal government was asking black soldiers to risk their lives just like white soldiers, but was acting as if a black soldier's life was worth less than a white soldier's life.<sup>88</sup> Colonel Shaw would not stand-by and allow the government to discriminate against his men.

Colonel Shaw, therefore, lost no time in letting Governor Andrew know about the pay problem. The governor too was outraged and hurried to Washington to find out why the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment was receiving less pay than white regiments. When Washington refused to give the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment equal pay, Governor Andrew asked the Massachusetts lawmakers to make up the difference in pay. The Massachusetts Congress voted and agreed to make up the difference. The black soldiers of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment "refused again to accept any pay until Washington abolished the degrading distinction between white and colored

troops."<sup>89</sup> The black men of the regiment wanted justice, as well as equal pay.

Colonel Shaw and his officers backed up the black soldiers and also refused to accept any salary until their soldiers got their "proper" pay. It was unheard of at the time for officers and soldiers to stand together, but more importantly the fact that the soldiers were black and the officers were white made it even more surprising.<sup>90</sup> As a result of the officers and soldiers of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment standing together on the pay problem, black and white abolitionists began to pressure Congress for an equal pay bill.

In December 1863, the Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton, asked Congress to enact legislation equalizing the pay of white and black soldiers. A considerable portion of the North, however, still opposed paying black soldiers the same as white soldiers. "Democrats and even some Republicans reasoned that to pay Negro troopers the same wages as white soldiers would degrade the white man."<sup>91</sup>

Not until 15 June 1864, did Congress finally enact legislation granting equal pay to black soldiers. "The law was made retroactive to January 1, 1864, for all Negroes soldiers, and retroactive to the time of enlistment for those Negroes who had been free men on April 19, 1861."<sup>92</sup> Black soldiers of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment received their full \$13 a month, and also received equal back pay for the 18 months they had served without salary. Finally, Congress agreed a black

soldier's life was worth the same as a white man's life. Even though it was hard for all men to fight and die, it was finally accepted that all men died equal.<sup>93</sup>

#### Onward to Fort Wagner

Even before the second month without pay passed for the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment, the regiment was to see "the elephant". The regiment had been on Hilton Head Island about three weeks when the regiment received orders to proceed to Folly Island at the mouth of the Stone River. On 8 July 1863, the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment embarked on the steamer Chasseur with the headquarters and seven companies, and the remaining companies embarked on the steamer Cossack. By daybreak the next morning the steamers were anchored off Folly Island, just a few miles south of Charleston.

As the steamers anchored off Folly Island several other vessels loaded with troops and supplies anchored around the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment. The Union was forming a force to make an attack on the outer defenses of Charleston. The attack was intended to capture Fort Sumter, James Island, Morris Island, and the northern tip of Morris Island the greatest Confederate stronghold of all--Fort Wagner.<sup>94</sup> Fort Wagner prevented the Union Army from capturing Charleston, and if Fort Wagner fell, it would be difficult for the Confederates to hold Charleston; the capital of the first state to leave the Union.

General Gillmore was the ground commander, and Admiral Dahlgren was in command of the massive naval squadron anchored

off Folly Island. Admiral Dahlgren was to reinforce the ground attack with naval gunfire. He was confident he could provide adequate gunfire prior to the attack to take Fort Wagner. General Gillmore's plan required that the strong points on James Island had to be contained initially. Then, Fort Sumter had to be knocked out. In addition, the Confederate shore batteries all around Charleston Harbor had to be silenced. When this was accomplished, an attack could be made on Fort Wagner. Admiral Dahlgren planned to have the Union guns pound the fort to rubble, then the infantry would storm through the fort.<sup>95</sup>

Some Union units had already landed on Morris Island prior to the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts' arrival at Folly Island. The Union units' mission was to secure the approach to Fort Wagner. On 10 July 1863, heavy fire from the Confederates located at James Island, Fort Sumter, and the shore batteries, pinned the Union units down on the beachhead. If the units did not break through, the plan to attack Fort Wagner could not be executed. On 11 July 1863, the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment was ordered to James Island for reinforcements as a part of General Terry's division. General Terry's division consisted of three brigades, Davis' brigade, Stevenson's brigade, and Montgomery's brigade which included the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment and 2nd South Carolina Regiment.<sup>96</sup>

"About noon on the 11th, the regiment landed, marched about a mile, and camped in open ground on the furrows of an old field."<sup>97</sup> Colonel Shaw then ordered Company B to John's Island to



take out a firing position that was firing upon Union vessels. Later that afternoon, Colonel Shaw sent Lieutenant Colonel Hallowell, with Companies D, F, I, and K to picket to the right of the regiment's location. Between the 11th and 15th of July, the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment continued to alternate companies for picket to the right of the regiment's location. Companies B, H, and K of the regiment, under command of Captain Willard, were detailed for picket on the 15th to relieve the men of Davis' brigade.<sup>98</sup>

At about midnight, the regiment was told to prepare for skirmishes, because of an impending attack. In the early morning on 16 July 1863, the men of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment were awakened by heavy firing on the picket line. The soldiers of the regiment worked rapidly to ensure the picket line was ready for a possible Confederate break through. When the enemy attack drove back the 10th Connecticut Volunteers, the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment covered the retreat of the other soldiers and smashed the Confederates. Company K's right flank was the first point that made contact with the attacking Confederate force. The enemy soon gained the road to the rear of Company H. At this point, Companies B, H, and K were in the battle. In an attempt to capture the 10th Connecticut, the enemy sent a portion of its force forward; the "resistance made by Captain Simpkins [Company K] had allowed time for the Tenth Connecticut to abandon its dangerous position at the double-

quick. None too soon, however, for five minutes' delay would have been fatal."<sup>99</sup>

This was a supreme moment for the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment because it was the first time they and fought as a regiment and the "dark line stood stanch, holding the front at the most vital point."<sup>100</sup> That evening General Terry was ordered to evacuate James Island. "At about five o'clock p.m., the Fifty-Fourth was relieved by the Fifty-Second Pennsylvania, and returned to the bivouac."<sup>101</sup> On the way back to the bivouac the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment had to pass the camp of the 10th Connecticut. The white soldiers cheered as the black regiment marched by. Later the regiment's colonel and several other white officers of the 10th Connecticut expressed their appreciation to Colonel Shaw for the service rendered by the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment. As a correspondent reporting from Morris Island wrote a few days after, "the boys of the Tenth Connecticut could not help loving the men who saved them from destruction."<sup>102</sup>

On 16 July 1863, Colonel Shaw received orders to move to Morris Island and report to General Strong. That evening Colonel Shaw told his black soldiers about the orders, and also told the black soldiers that once again the eyes of the nation were on the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment. Later that evening, Sergeant Major Lewis Douglass wrote his father: "By the time you get this letter, I will have been in battle. If I do not survive, know this, I am not afraid to die if my death will mean

freedom for our people. See to it, F[f]ather. See to it that our sacrifice will not have been in vain . . . ."103 At 9:30 that night, " by Colonel Davis' order the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts was given the advance . . . followed by the other regiment[s], the route being pointed out by guides from the engineers, who accompanied the head column."104

It was a stormy night, but the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment marched all night. " Foot sore, weary, hungry and thirsty, the regiment was halted near the beach opposite Folly Island about 5 a.m., on the 17th."105 The regiment had not settled down when Colonel Shaw was called to a meeting at the headquarters of General Gillmore. General Gillmore was in charge of all land operations. He had summoned the brigade and regiment commanders to his headquarters to brief them on the upcoming battle. On the evening of the following day, an attack would be made on Fort Wagner. Meanwhile, "sleep was had [by the men] until the burning sun awakened the greater number."106

#### The Great Assault on Fort Wagner

"Battery Wagner, so named by the Confederates, in memory of Lieut.-Col. Thomas M. Wagner, First South Carolina Artillery, killed at Fort Sumter,"107 stretched some 630 feet across the entire northern tip of Morris Island. The fort was built of sand and turf, and had a face of sturdy logs. It also had thick parapets and deep bomb-proof dugouts which provided excellent shelter for the Confederate soldiers garrisoned there. On the east side of the fort lay the Atlantic Ocean, and on the west

side a creek and bottomless marsh. The fort, therefore could be approached only from the south. However, it was protected by Confederate guns of every size. Also, less than two miles away were the guns of Fort Sumter, as well as, the many shore batteries. Fort Wagner, as referred by the Union, was well guarded.

At 9 a.m. 18 July 1863, the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment disembarked at Pawnee Landing, near Morris Island, and after a march of about six miles arrived at Lighthouse Inlet where they rested awaiting transportation.<sup>108</sup> "When all was prepared, the Fifty-f[F]ourth boarded a small steamer, landed on Morris Island, about 5 p.m., and remained near the shore for further orders."<sup>109</sup> Upon arriving at Morris Island, Colonel Shaw and Adjutant James reported to General Strong for further orders. General Strong assured Colonel Shaw that Fort Wagner would be stormed that evening. "Knowing Colonel Shaw's desire to place his men beside white troops, he [General Strong] said, 'You may lead the column, if you say 'yes.' Your men, I know, are worn out, but do as you choose.'"<sup>110</sup> Colonel Shaw ordered Adjutant James to return and have Lieutenant Colonel Hallowell march the regiment forward to General Strong's headquarters. General Seymour, who had been assigned command of the assault column, later stated the reasons why the honorable but dangerous duty of leading the assault was assigned to the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment was because "it was believed that the Fifty-f[F]ourth was in every respect as efficient as any other body of men; and as it

was one of the strongest and best officered, there seemed to be no good reason why it should not be selected for the advance. This point was decided by General Strong and myself."<sup>111</sup>

At about 6 p.m. Lieutenant Colonel Hallowell arrived at General Strong's headquarters with the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment. The men of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment were worn-out and hungry from the previous two days of fighting and moving, and had received no hot food and little sleep. The soldiers, however, continued to display courage and were motivated to storm Fort Wagner. Upon arriving, General Strong expressed his sympathy and his desire that the soldiers have food. "It could not be, however, for it was necessary that the regiment should move on to the position assigned."<sup>112</sup> General Strong did, however, detain Colonel Shaw for supper and sent the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment forward under Lieutenant Colonel Hallowell.

At 6:30 p.m. Colonel Shaw, accompanied by General Strong, departed General Strong's headquarters to link-up with his regiment already in position. "After proceeding a short distance, he[Colonel Shaw] turned back, and gave to Mr. Edward L. Pierce, a personal friend, who had been General Strong's guest for several days, his letters and some papers, with a request to forward them to his family if anything occurred to him requiring such service."<sup>113</sup>

The attack was to begin at 7:45 p.m., five minutes after the bombardment stopped. The signal to begin the assault would

be three red rockets sent up by the New Ironsides. Brigade headquarters would also fire a signal gun. The Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment was to attack with three companies abreast, in triple ranks. Company K was designated the color company. Company K would carry the flag and lead the assault.

The guns of the Union Navy thundered on, continuously impacting on Fort Wagner. Admiral Dahlgren had no way of telling what damage the pounding of the guns had caused, but he felt Fort Wagner was crumbling and the assault would be met with little resistance. There was no one to tell Admiral Dahlgren that he was mistaken. Admiral Dahlgren did not know that the continuous shelling was causing far less damage than expected. The shells did not blast down the parapets as thought, instead, the soft sand had absorbed much of the shock from the shelling. When the guns on Fort Wagner did not fire back at the Union ships, Admiral Dahlgren was overjoyed and gave the signal to begin the assault.

As the last units formed in column behind the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment, "Colonel Shaw walked back to Lieutenant-Colonel Hallowell, and said, 'I shall go in advance with the National flag. You will keep the State flag with you; it will give the men something to rally around. We shall take the fort or die there! Good-by[e]!'"<sup>114</sup> Shortly afterwards General Strong, mounted upon a grey horse, rode in front of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment's line and nodded with satisfaction towards the black soldiers. The soldiers stood at attention in a perfect line with their eyes straight ahead as

General Strong rode up. General Strong stopped in front of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment and said,

Boys, I am a Massachusetts man, and I know you will fight for the honor of the State. I am sorry you must go into the fight tired and hungry, but the men in the fort are tired too. There are but three hundred behind those walls, and they have been fighting all day. Don't fire a musket on the way up, but go in and bayonet them at their guns.<sup>115</sup>

General Strong then called out the colorbearer to step forward. After the colorbearer stepped forward General Strong said, "if this man should fall, who will lift the flag and carry it on?"<sup>116</sup> Colonel Shaw, standing nearby, responded immediately, "I will."<sup>117</sup> The men of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment responded with a loud cheer, then General Strong rode off to give the final signal to begin the assault.

At exactly 7:45 p.m., three red-tailed rockets hissed up from the New Ironside; at the same time the signal gun went off. Colonel Shaw then gave the command of attention and said, "move in quick time until within a hundred yards of the fort; then double quick, and charge!"<sup>118</sup> Colonel Shaw then pulled out his sword, raised it high and yelled forward, and the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment advanced to assault Fort Wagner.

Colonel Shaw charged forward with his black regiment right behind. Night was closing in fast, stars began to appear in the sky, but not one soldier of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment looked up; all eyes was on Fort Wagner. Suddenly, shells from a Confederate shore battery impacted near the lead company. The colorbearers saw that the flags were giving the enemy a target and began to furl them, but were ordered to unfurl

the colors and charge forward. As the regiment charged forward, the beach on the right narrowed. In order to keep the ranks aligned, the men on the right went knee deep into the ocean. On the left, marsh grass tore some of the soldiers uniforms. Some of the soldiers stumbled over roots, but refused to stop. The Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment pushed on!

Shells from distant Confederate shore batteries continued to impact all around the regiment as it charged forward. The Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment did not fire a shot. Smoke swirled over the parapets on Fort Wagner, however, there was no sign of life; nothing moved after the naval pounding stopped. As the front line of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment was about 300 yards from the outer edge of Fort Wagner, the moon came out and now the attacking forces could be plainly seen by the Confederate soldiers in the fort. Suddenly, at about 200 yards from the fort, the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment began to receive direct fire from the parapets. A blast of flame developed along the wall as hundreds of Confederate soldiers opened fire from the fort. Several of the black soldiers in the lead company fell, killed by the initial volley of Confederate fire. The Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment witnessed its dead lying sprawled all around as they continued to charge forward. Before the enemy had time to fire a second volley, Colonel Shaw jumped forward waving his sword overhead ordering his regiment to continue to charge forward.<sup>119</sup>



Hearing Colonel Shaw's voice, the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment recovered. The colors moved forward, and the men rushed toward the fort with bayonets leveled. Every man was yelling fiercely as he had been trained to do when charging with a bayonet. Another Confederate volley leveled a few more soldiers, but the advance did not stop. From the fort, the Confederate soldiers met the oncoming black soldiers with shrapnel fired from cannons. A few more black soldiers fell, but somehow a few stayed alive. The colorbearers somehow managed to get to the top of a parapet, planted the state and regimental flags on the parapet, and then fought furiously to defend the flags. In hand-to-hand fighting, Lieutenant Colonel Hallowell was wounded in the groin, Captain Willard in the leg, Adjutant James in the ankle and side, and Lieutenant Homans in the shoulder.<sup>120</sup> The leading company was forced back with heavy losses, but not before rescuing their colors. On the right of the line, Colonel Shaw moved forward to the top of the parapet with the flag bearer right behind him. The color guard fell wounded, but Sergeant Carney keeping his word, caught the flag before it touched the ground.<sup>121</sup>

Colonel Shaw again inspired his men yelling: "Forward Fifty-fourth!"<sup>122</sup> Suddenly, Colonel Shaw fell forward off the wall into the fort. Colonel Shaw had been shot through the heart. The assault lasted no more than ten minutes before the Confederates drove off the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment. The charge of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment was made

and repulsed before the arrival of any other Union soldiers. The retreating men of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment took cover in shell holes. From there they continued shooting at the parapets to prevent the Confederate soldiers from attacking.

Meanwhile, the Confederate guns blasted the brigade coming up to support the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment. Only a portion of the brigade managed to reach the remaining soldiers of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment. Along the other parts of the Union assault line the results were the same; the Confederate soldiers had stopped the assault. When General Strong advanced with the follow-on brigade it was met with the same devastating Confederate fire. General Strong was also shot while conducting the assault on Fort Wagner and was carried off by a few of his men to die.

Of the 22 officers from the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment who assaulted Fort Wagner, three were killed, and eleven were wounded.<sup>123</sup> Captain Emilio was the highest ranking officer left and the men regrouped under his command. When Captain Emilio led the survivors back into camp, only about half of the fighting Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment remained. Of the 660 that had taken part in the great assault on Fort Wagner, 117 had been killed, 149 wounded, and 52 were missing.<sup>124</sup> The men were tired, weary, and heartbroken. They wept for their fallen comrades who laid stretched on the oceanfront, in the sand holes, and rifle pits. There was but one consolation for the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment at the end of the assault on Fort

Wagner; the regiment had fought gallantly and had proven itself in battle. The regiment "had carried the courage of a race through a storm of Confederate bullets and through the terrible burden of their own fear to the very teeth of the enemy."<sup>125</sup>

On 22 July 1863, General Gillmore sent officers to ask the Confederates at Fort Wagner for Colonel Shaw's body, since it had been accepted practice to return the body of fallen officers to respective sides during the Civil War. The Confederate general refused. It was later ascertained that Colonel Shaw's body had been buried with his soldiers on 19 July 1863.

Assistant-Surgeon Luck, a Union surgeon who was captured while engaged in assisting the wounded on the morning of 19 July 1863, stated that Brigadier-General Hagood, commanding the Confederate force at Fort Wagner said "it thus occurred that Colonel Shaw, commanding negroes, was buried with negroes."<sup>126</sup>

Colonel Shaw was the only white officer in the Civil War who was buried with black soldiers. The burial of Colonel Shaw with his black soldiers was without question, intended by the Confederate to be disrespectful to white officers who lead black soldiers. Colonel Shaw's death and burial with his black soldiers, however, was not viewed by blacks as disrespectful and was not soon forgotten. Black men flocked to enlist in the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment; and before the Civil war ended black men were serving in infantry, artillery, cavalry, and engineer units for the Union. Black soldiers soon fought in more

than a hundred battles, skirmishes, and actions in the Civil War after the great assault on Fort Wagner.

When Fort Wagner finally fell during the first week of September 1863, the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts was one of the first troops to enter the former Confederate stronghold.<sup>127</sup>

## CHAPTER SIX

### CONCLUSION

The events leading up to the formation of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment are lessons about the black man's struggle to become a soldier in the United States Army. It is a saga of black men who volunteered to serve a country which would not grant them citizenship. Nevertheless, brave black soldiers continued to serve in war after war, some to prove their patriotism, some to provide for their families, and many to gain their freedom.

This research study chronicled the major events which led to the formation of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment and its first campaign as a regiment. Previous historians have chronicled little details about the early history of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment. This study fills a void in the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment's early history. It reveals policies and attitudes which lead to the decision to officially include black Americans among the roles of those who served their country in uniform. The Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment, however, was not the first to fight in integrated battles. Numerous militia units fought along integrated battle lines prior to and during the Revolutionary War.

Interestingly, the use of black Americans as militiamen or soldiers was tolerated whenever the need outweighed the preconceived prejudices for their use. These black Americans, however, did not allow the preconceived prejudices to keep them from the opportunity to wear the United States Army uniform. Black Americans used necessity as a means to achieve their ultimate goal of serving along side white Americans in the United States Armed Services.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the regiment's history was the willingness of these men to serve their country as a way to ensure that blacks were not returned to slavery. Recruitment of black soldiers through the abolitionist channels provided the base force for the regiment. Even though a majority of the black soldiers were not from Massachusetts, they all came together and served under the Massachusetts flag. The black soldiers worked together for a common goal of serving their country with dignity, just as white soldiers had for the past several years. Without commitment, dedication, and believing in one another, the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment may not have survived as the first black regiment of free black men of the North that was organized after the Emancipation Proclamation became law.

Strong leadership cannot be discounted as a major factor in the regiment's formation. Sound, basic leadership qualities displayed by Colonel Shaw, Lieutenant Colonel Hallowell, and all the white officers of the regiment made the transition of the

black men into black soldiers easier for the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment. Colonel Shaw and all his officers cared deeply for the welfare of their men despite being ostracized by their fellow officers for commanding and being assigned to a black regiment. Of particular note, is the way Colonel Shaw and all his officers refused pay along with the black soldiers of the regiment until the federal government passed law to pay black soldiers the same as white soldiers.

The history of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment is of special importance for the following reasons: (1) Little has been written on the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment, yet the regiment played a vital role in turning the Civil War around for the Union; (2) Long road marches and isolation from white soldiers was the order of the day for the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment, however, despite the isolation the regiment proved to be just as effective, and in some situations, more effective than white regiments; and (3) The Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment fought gallantly on James Island and Morris Island, particularly the assault on Fort Wagner. Yet, the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment is frequently omitted in many history books, possibly because of the short history of the regiment. It is also possible that many of the black soldiers had stories to tell and families to go home too, but since a majority of the black soldiers could not read or write, their stories remained a mystery and were not captured in history books throughout the United States.

Frederick Douglass' eldest son wrote his father on the evening of the great assault on Fort Wagner and expressed a concern that he and the rest of the black soldiers not die in vain. It is the writer's opinion that the black soldiers of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment did not die in vain. Rather, hope was kept alive. For in the years after the Civil War the federal government changed the United States Constitution and black Americans were given the same freedom as white Americans. In 1865, the Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery. In 1868, the Fourteenth Amendment stated that all persons born in the United States were citizens and that no state could take away the rights given to citizens by the Constitution. In 1870, the Fifteenth Amendment stated that no citizen could have his rights taken away because of race or color or because he had once been a slave. The law of the land after the Civil War stated clearly that black citizens too, could vote and run for office, as well as, go to school, work, and live a life the same as white citizens. It is the writer's opinion, again, that the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment played a part in helping black American receive the same rights as white Americans after the Civil War.

#### Areas for Future Study

Throughout the history of the events leading up to the formation of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment, a strong political and bureaucratic movement opposed granting black Americans the right to officially wear the uniform of a United



States soldier. As this research study demonstrates, black American volunteers were not lacking in number as far back as the Colonial Period, 1639-1760. Why was the right to wear the uniform of a United States soldier so heavily guarded against black men? Did immigrants experience the same difficulties as black Americans, in their struggle to become United States soldiers? More research should be done to address these questions.

Additionally, more research needs to be focused on the events of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment after the great assault on Fort Wagner. This study briefly mentioned the impact that the writer believes the regiment made as a result of events leading up to, and to include the great assault on Fort Wagner. This study, however, does not address the specifics about the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment after the assault on Fort Wagner through the retirement of the regiment.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>3</sup>The Negro in the Military Service of the United States, 1639-1886 (Office of the Adjutant General), Volume 1.

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., XI.

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<sup>6</sup>Jack D. Forner, Blacks and the Military in American History (New York: Praeger Press, 1974), 3.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 3-5.

<sup>8</sup>The Negro in the Military Service of the United States, 1639-1886 (Office of the Adjutant General), Volume 1.

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 8-9.

<sup>11</sup>Molefi K. Asante and Mark T. Mattson, Historical and Cultural Atlas of African American (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1982), 23.

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<sup>14</sup>Morris J. MacGregor and Bernard C. Nalty, Blacks in the United States Armed Forces Basic Documents (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1982), 23.

<sup>15</sup>Nalty, 18.

<sup>16</sup>Russell F. Weigley, History of the United States Army (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 93.

<sup>17</sup>Nalty, 26.

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<sup>20</sup>MacGregor and Nalty, 215.

<sup>21</sup>Donaldson, 29.

<sup>22</sup>The Negro in the Military Service of the United States, 1639-1886 (Office of the Adjutant General), Volume 1.

<sup>23</sup>MacGregor and Nalty, 220.

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<sup>25</sup>Irving Werstein, The Storming of Fort Wagner (New York: Scholastic Book Services, 1970), 18.

<sup>26</sup>Forner, 34-35.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 32.

<sup>28</sup>Cornish, 46-57.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 80.

<sup>30</sup>Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Army Life in a Black Regiment (Williamstown, Massachusetts: Corner House Publishers, 1984), 1-5.

<sup>31</sup>Westein, 18.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 10.

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 20.

<sup>35</sup>Luis F. Emilio, History of the Fifty-Fourth Regiment (Boston: The Boston Company, 1894), 2.

#### Chapter Five

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 5.

<sup>37</sup>Russell Duncan, Blue-Eyed Child of Fortune (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 283-284.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 285-286.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 284.

<sup>40</sup>Emilio, 6.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

<sup>42</sup>Walter Dean Myers, Now is Your Time: The African-American Struggle for Freedom (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991), 153.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 156.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 159.

<sup>45</sup>Emilio, 14.

<sup>46</sup>James M. McPherson, The Struggle for Equality (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1967), 205.

<sup>47</sup>New York Weekly Anglo-African Paper (New York: 1863-1865).

<sup>48</sup>The Massachusetts 54th Colored Infantry (Virginia: 1991), Audiovisual.

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<sup>53</sup>Emilio, 22.

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 22.

<sup>56</sup>Paul A. Hutton, A Brave Black Regiment (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group Inc., 1992), 23.

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<sup>59</sup>Ibid.

<sup>60</sup>Duncan, 308.

<sup>61</sup>Emilio, 21-22.

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<sup>63</sup>Robert E. Greene, Swamp Angels (Washington D.C.: BoMark/Greene Publishing Group, 1990), 87.

<sup>64</sup>Werstein, 50.

<sup>65</sup>Emilio, 24.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., 30.

<sup>67</sup>Hutton, 27.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid.

<sup>69</sup>Emilio, 30-31.

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<sup>71</sup>Hutton, 33.

<sup>72</sup>Werstein, 61.

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<sup>82</sup>Ibid., 40.

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<sup>85</sup>Ibid., 46.

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- <sup>57</sup>Glory.
- <sup>88</sup>Werstein, 80.
- <sup>89</sup>McPherson, 214.
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- <sup>93</sup>Ibid., 83.
- <sup>94</sup>Emilio, 68.
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- <sup>96</sup>Ibid., 53.
- <sup>97</sup>Ibid.
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- <sup>99</sup>Hutton, 65-66.
- <sup>100</sup>Ibid., 67.
- <sup>101</sup>Ibid., 69.
- <sup>102</sup>Ibid., 66.
- <sup>103</sup>Greene, 88.
- <sup>104</sup>Emilio, 63-64.
- <sup>105</sup>Ibid., 65.
- <sup>106</sup>Ibid.
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- <sup>108</sup>Emilio, 68.
- <sup>109</sup>Ibid.
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- <sup>111</sup>Ibid., 74-75.
- <sup>112</sup>Hutton, 79.
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<sup>114</sup>Ibid., 77.

<sup>115</sup>Ibid.

<sup>116</sup>Ibid.

<sup>117</sup>Ibid.

<sup>118</sup>Ibid., 79.

<sup>119</sup>Emilio, 80.

<sup>120</sup>Ibid., 81.

<sup>121</sup>Werstein, 115.

<sup>122</sup>Hutton, 88.

<sup>123</sup>Werstein, 115.

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